

The Public's Health

By Karen Sullivan

The Butte-Silver Bow Board of Health has sanctioned the creation of a new committee that would focus on various studies about the health of Butte-Silver Bow residents.

The board's sanction came at its Jan. 8, 2020 regular meeting. The issue now moves to the county's Council of Commissioners for its prospective sanction. The request for commissioners' sanction will occur at the council's next regular meeting tomorrow evening.

The new health study committee, which would be an advisory subcommittee to the Board of Health, would focus on studies such as the community health needs assessments conducted every three years in Butte (the 2020 assessment process is under way), air quality studies, and cancer studies conducted by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services and others, such as Suzanne McDermott, PhD, of the University of South Carolina, who has recently published two cancer studies on Butte-Silver Bow and Anaconda-Deer Lodge. McDermott is also co-author of a recent study focused on newborn meconium in Butte-Silver Bow, with a comparison group of newborns in South Carolina.

The new committee would be chaired by me. Should the Council of Commissioners sanction the committee, the county's chief executive, Dave Palmer, would appoint its members, representing the county's Board of Health, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Montana Technological University, and St. James Healthcare. Members could also include ex-officio representatives from private industry. Once the committee is prospectively formulated, it would create a charter and bylaws as it begins to discuss the various health studies focused on Butte.

Meetings of the committee would be publicly noticed and abide by Montana open meetings laws.

Included at the top of the committee's priorities would be review and discussion of McDermott's most recent study, titled "High Incidence of Brain and Other Nervous System Cancer Identified in Two Mining Counties, 2001-2015." The study was published Jan. 6 in *Spatial and Spatio-temporal Epidemiology*. The study looked at brain cancer rates in Butte-Silver Bow and Anaconda-Deer Lodge and found higher incidence rates of brain cancer in two age groups, when compared to the rest of Montana.

I spoke with McDermott by telephone about the study's findings Jan. 9, and in that conversation, McDermott reiterated her call initially outlined in the study document for additional research and public health action.

I work closely with staff at Montana DPHHS, and I can tell you this: Both I and DPHHS staff take all reports of high levels of adverse health effects, such as cancer, and calls for public health action very seriously. But based on a thorough review of the public health and environmental data available, DPHHS officials and I do not agree with the conclusions of McDermott and her co-authors.

Additionally, I, and officials from EPA and the Agency on Toxic Substances and Disease Registry strongly disagree with the findings of McDermott's meconium study. The EPA will

explain why at the Board of Health's upcoming monthly meeting Feb. 5, and at the Council of Commissioners' meeting that same evening.

Regarding the recent brain cancer study, DPHHS has investigated the cited cases of brain cancer in greater detail, and found that the specific types of brain cancers of the patients in the two age groups cited by McDermott – ages 0-5 and 30-34 – do not point toward an environmental cause or other common cause to all the cases.

Based on the information available to DPHHS and me, I believe it is not possible to determine the cause or causes of brain cancer in these patients. DPHHS is coordinating with the Butte-Silver Bow Health Department to review current environmental data. DPHHS also continues to monitor brain cancer incidence in Butte-Silver Bow and Anaconda-Deer Lodge counties, stays abreast of the latest research on the causes of brain cancer causes, and works with local cancer stakeholders to provide education on cancer.

Quite simply, the cause of brain cancer is not known. There is no evidence to conclude that brain cancers among Butte-Silver Bow and Anaconda-Deer Lodge residents were caused by heavy metal exposure.

More information about McDermott's brain cancer study is available on the Butte-Silver Bow website at [[HYPERLINK "https://www.co.silverbow.mt.us/DocumentCenter/View/17246/Brain-Cancer-Frequently-Asked-Questions"](https://www.co.silverbow.mt.us/DocumentCenter/View/17246/Brain-Cancer-Frequently-Asked-Questions)] and on the DPHHS website at [[HYPERLINK "https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/Cancer/TumorRegistry"](https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/Cancer/TumorRegistry)].

The new health study committee, in my view, will be able to look at the abundance of studies conducted on the Butte-Silver Bow population, such as Dr. McDermott's most recent study, discuss that information, and if needed, make recommendations to the Board of Health and Health Department staff on calls to public health action.

A health study work group that looks every five years at outcomes from blood lead medical monitoring in the community and the effectiveness of the Butte-Silver Bow Residential Metals Abatement Program would continue. That work is driven by the Record of Decision related to the Butte Priority Soils Operable Unit.

The new committee could discuss that five-year study, but would be more encompassing in regard to the myriad health studies being conducted on the Butte-Silver Bow population.